

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF PROFESSIONALS  
AND SELF-HELP GROUPS WITHIN THE  
FRAMEWORK OF BALANCE THEORY AND  
EXCHANGE THEORY**

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While self-help groups have existed in different forms for centuries, self-help groups have expanded enormously during the past two decades and currently offer services to millions of individuals. Although historically most professionals in the human services have ignored or minimized self-help approaches, the rapid expansion of these groups, coupled with their apparent ability to attract and retain members, has led to increased recognition of the importance of self-help groups in the service delivery system and has generated renewed discussion concerning the relationship of professionals with self-help groups. Although the issue of professional involvement with self-help groups has emerged as a pivotal one and there has been a great deal of literature concerning the relationship of professionals with self-help groups, there have been few attempts to explain or conceptualize such relationships within a theoretical framework and little systematic research has been conducted on professionals' relationships with self-help groups (Borman, 1976; Levy, 1978; Baker, 1977; Jertison, 1975). Case studies and contrasting examples of selected professionals interacting with self-help groups highlighted in the recent literature are enlightening and interesting, but such examples fail to explain and describe the relationships within larger theoretical frameworks and, therefore, the ability to generalize such examples to other professionals and self-help groups is limited. A number of theories in the social sciences do exist which seem to relate to this theme and can be applied to the relationships of professionals to self-help groups. Two theories in particular -- balance theory of coordination and exchange theory -- appear to have a great deal of applicability.

Balance theory of coordination, as postulated by Litwak and Meyer (1961, 1974), is founded on the assumption that bureaucratic organizations (and professionals who represent them) and primary groups (e.g., self-help groups) provide complementary functions, with both necessary in the achievement of some social goals. Although Litwak and Meyer note that traditional sociological theory considers bureaucratic organizations and primary groups antithetical, they assert that the relative contributions of both are frequently necessary to achieve optimum social goals. The essence of balance theory asserts that bureaucratic organizations and primary groups must maintain some "distance" from each other so that each can execute its function effectively and not compromise the other. However, this distance must not be too great for proper coordination to take place. Therefore, they are best linked or coordinated when they are at some theoretical "midpoint" of social distance. A crucial element in balance theory is the process of coordination or linking (i.e., the relationship) which must occur between bureaucratic organizations and primary groups. Litwak and Meyer have identified eight (8) "linking mechanisms" which may be used by bureaucratic organizations to achieve coordination with primary groups. These eight mechanisms are designed to either increase, decrease, or maintain "distance" in order that a midpoint of distance can be achieved. From the perspective of balance theory, relationships between professionals and self-help groups may be conceptualized as "linking mechanisms" aimed at increasing, decreasing, or maintaining distance so that the professionals and the self-help groups can achieve a midpoint of social distance and each can function in a complementary and optimal fashion.

Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Emerson, 1976) views relationships between parties (i.e., individuals, groups, organizations) as exchange activities which are governed by quasi-economic principles such as cost, reward, and profit. Based heavily on operant learning theory, exchange theory postulates that parties enter into relationships with other parties seeking "rewards" and, if these rewards exceed their "costs" incurred from engaging in the relationships, a "profit" is realized. If both parties realize a profit from an exchange or relationship, the exchange will likely continue. While exchange

theory has been used extensively to describe and explain relationships on micro-levels (i.e., between individuals), exchange theory can be used to describe and explain relationships on macro-levels as well. Organizational exchange theory (Levine and White, 1961), for example, has been advanced to explain and describe transactions between organizations where organizations exchange needed inputs and/or resources necessary to sustain the organizations within their environments. From this theoretical perspective, professionals who develop relationships with self-help groups are engaging in exchange relationships.

Balance theory seems to be useful in describing the nature of relationships between professionals and self-help groups, while social exchange theory seems to be useful in describing the function of the relationships. These theories, therefore, can serve as conceptual frameworks. Each theory postulates critical variables in explaining the relationship between professionals and self-help groups. Exchange theory, for example, states that the critical variables affecting the relationship or exchange between two parties include: the availability of resources to each party, the anticipated "returns" each party to the exchange receives, the "costs" each party to the exchange incurs, and the ultimate goals of each party. Exchange theory predicts that parties will enter an exchange or relationship with each other in order to acquire necessary resources to achieve their respective goals. Balance theory, on the other hand, is predicated on the assumption that bureaucratic organizations and primary groups (such as self-help groups) are complementary in nature and support the functions of each other. This theory predicts that relationships (i.e., linking mechanisms) will develop between bureaucratic organizations and self-help groups in order to increase, maintain, or decrease the distance between the two so that the effectiveness of each can be maximized. The critical variables as postulated by balance theory can be summarized as: the perceived complementarity of the two systems, the "ideal" distance between the systems, the actual or perceived distance between the systems, and the structure of the systems (especially the bureaucratic organization). Relationships or linking mechanisms, according to balance theory, develop and are maintained to coordinate the functions and activities of the two systems so that each can function at an optimal level.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an empirical investigation of professionals' relationships with self-help using both balance theory and exchange theory as conceptual frameworks. While the focus of the research was on professionals' knowledge of, referrals to, utilization of, linkages with, and attitudes toward self-help groups, an attempt was also made to ascertain if balance theory and/or exchange theory were useful in explaining professionals' interactions with self-help groups.

### Methodology

A questionnaire was developed to assess and quantify knowledge of, interactions with (referrals and linkages), and attitudes toward self-help groups. Other questions which related to selected demographic, organizational, and attitudinal variables were also developed and included to determine their relationship with self-help knowledge, interactions, and attitudes. Additionally, several Likert-type statements were developed to inquire about why respondents might interact with self-help groups. Three of these statements were derived from balance theory and three were derived from exchange theory. The questionnaire was sent to 717 professional social workers in a mid-western state who

were members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). A total of 285 completed questionnaires were returned which translated into a 39.7% response rate.

## Results

### Knowledge

The average number of self-help groups which respondents indicated they knew about was 4.51. When asked to describe their general, overall knowledge of self-help groups and principles, 78% indicated they had an "average" or better knowledge, 22% indicated they knew a "little" about self-help, and less than 1% indicated they knew nothing about self-help. Respondents who listed more than 5 self-help groups tended to be employed in organizations serving clients with medical or substance abuse problems, had a professional orientation toward community involvement, were active in professional organizations, were involved in some form of private practice, and had linkages with self-help groups. These respondents also perceived self-help as effective, potentially important in the service delivery system, and perceived themselves as being involved with self-help in the future.

### Referrals and Utilization

Seventy-eight percent of the respondents who had contact with clients reported that they had made at least one referral to a self-help group within the past year; the average number of referrals made by respondents were 11.83. Additionally, 82% of the respondents reported they had talked to clients about self-help groups in the past year, 75% reported discussing self-help experiences with clients in the past year, 48% reported they called a self-help group on behalf of clients in the past year, 47% reported that they gave self-help literature to clients in the past year, and 10% reported they had accompanied clients to a self-help group in the past year. These results are summarized in Table 1.

When respondents who made at least one (1) referral to a self-help group within the past year were compared with respondents who had not made any referrals, the following significant results were observed: (a) they had fewer years of professional experience, (b) were employed in less bureaucratic organizations, (c) had a higher overall knowledge of self-help groups, (d) expressed more agreement with "balance theory" reasons for interactions with self-help groups, (e) were more likely to have had contact with more than 100 clients during the year, (f) were more likely to be employed in direct service positions, and (g) were more likely to be employed in organizations serving clients with medical or substance abuse problems. These respondents also were more likely to perceive self-help as effective, as potentially important in the service delivery system, and were more likely to perceive themselves as being involved with self-help in the future.

TABLE 1:  
REFERRAL/UTILIZATION DATA  
(IN LAST YEAR)

<u>Activity</u>	<u>% of Respondents</u>	<u>Mean</u>
	<u>Answering Yes</u>	
Made referrals to self-help groups	78%	11.83
Talked to clients about self-help groups	82%	15.15
Discussed self-help experiences with clients	75%	10.32
Called self-help groups on behalf of clients	48%	3.02
Gave literature about self-help groups to clients	47%	8.82
Accompanied clients to self-help groups	10%	0.51

### Linkages

Forty-one percent of the respondents reported that they had made at least one linkage with a self-help group in the past year; the mean number of linkages for respondents was 15.58. Twenty-one percent reported they had attended a meeting, 18% reported they had participated in the development of a self-help group, 17% reported providing consultation to a self-help group, 15% reported participating in a self-help group as a member, 14% reported serving as a member of a self-help board or advisory committee, and 12% reported serving as a leader or co-leader of a self-help group. These results are summarized in Table 2.

When respondents who reported at least one (1) linkage activity in the past year were compared with respondents who had no linkage activity, the following significant results were observed: (a) they had fewer years of professional experience; (b) they had a higher overall knowledge of self-help groups; (c) they expressed more agreement with both "balance theory" and "exchange theory" reasons for interacting with self-help groups; and (d) they had a greater orientation toward their clients and a lesser orientation towards their organizations.

### Attitudes

Forty-seven percent of the respondents reported that they perceived the effectiveness of self-help groups as "high" or "very high," 47% perceived the effectiveness as "average," and 6% perceived the effectiveness as "low" or "very low." Respondents who perceived the effectiveness of self-help groups as greater were more likely: (a) to know about 5 or more self-help groups; (b) to have a higher overall knowledge of self-help groups; (c) to agree with "balance theory" reasons for interacting with self-help groups; and (d) work in organizations which serve clients with medical or substance abuse problems.

Ninety-one percent of the respondents reported that they perceived self-help groups as being either "important" or "very important" in the service delivery system in the future. By contrast, only 9% reported perceiving self-help groups as being either "minimally" or "very minimally" important in the future. Respondents who perceived an increasing importance of self-help groups in the service delivery system in the future were more likely: (a) to know about 5 or more self-help groups; (b) to have a higher overall knowledge of self-help groups; (c) to have linkage activity with self-help groups; and (d) to agree with "balance theory" reasons for interacting with self-help groups.

Additionally, 52% of the respondents reported that they expected to be involved with self-help groups in the future, while 48% reported that they did not expect to be involved with self-help groups in the future. Respondents who perceived themselves as being involved with self-help groups in the future were more likely: (a) to know about 5 or more self-help groups; (b) to have a higher overall knowledge of self-help groups; (c) to have linkage activity with self-help groups; (d) to work with non-chronic clients; and (e) to have a greater orientation toward clients.

TABLE 2:  
LINKAGES WITH SELF-HELP GROUPS  
(IN PAST YEAR)

<u>Linkage</u>	<u>% of Respondents</u> <u>Answering Yes</u>
Attending meeting to become familiar	21%
Participated in the initiation or development of a self-help group	18%
Provided consultation to a self-help group	17%
Participated in a self-help group as a member	15%
Served as member of self-help board or advisory committee	14%
Served as a leader or co-leader of a self-help group	12%

### Reasons for Interacting with Self-Help Groups

Respondents were presented with six (6) Likert-scaled statements related to various reasons for interacting with self-help groups. The average score for each statement along with the statement's correlation with number of clients referred to self-help groups, number of linkages with self-help groups, knowledge of self-help groups is summarized in Table 3. A "balance index" and an "exchange index" were computed for each respondent by summing the scores for the three balance statements and three exchange statements, respectively. When this was done, the mean balance index for respondents was 12.60 while the mean exchange index was 9.69. Therefore, balance reasons for interaction were strongly preferred by respondents over exchange reasons. Additionally, 71% of the respondents identified balance reasons as the "primary" reasons for interacting with self-help groups while only 6% of the respondents identified exchange reasons as the "primary" reasons.

### Discussion

The results of the study support the hypothesis that professionals have knowledge of self-help groups and interact with them, contrary to some generalizations made in the self-help literature. Linkages with self-help groups also were found to be quite numerous in the professionals surveyed which indicates a willingness of these professionals to become involved with self-help groups and to engage in collaborative relationships with them. Attitudes toward self-help groups were consistently positive; self-help groups were perceived as effective and playing important roles in future service delivery systems. Over half (51%) of the respondents expressed a belief that they would become involved with self-help groups in the future. While this percentage was not much larger than the percentage of respondents already reporting involvement (41%), it still suggests that the respondents perceived a trend toward more active professional involvement with self-help in the future. Attitudes of respondents toward self-help groups were also strongly and positively associated with self-help knowledge and interactions.

A majority of respondents surveyed (71%) indicated that "balance theory" reasons were the predominant ones in explaining their interactions with self-help groups, while only a small percentage of respondents (6%) endorsed "exchange theory" reasons. Additionally, agreement with the balance reasons was significantly correlated with knowledge of self-help groups ( $r=.33$ ), number of referrals made to self-help groups ( $r=.23$ ), and utilization of self-help groups ( $r=.25$ ). Such findings support a balance theory conceptualization of the relationship of professionals to self-help groups. A balance theory conceptualization of these relationships has several important implications for practice. First, such a conceptualization implies that professionals who interact with self-help groups be acutely aware of potential control issues and make concerted efforts to ensure self-help groups of autonomy and freedom. In balance theory terms, the professional should not decrease the "distance" too much, as this would decrease the effectiveness of the self-help group. Although this line of thought has been stated many times in the literature, the concept of distance in balance terms may prove useful in allowing professionals to better conceptualize and quantify their involvement. Maintaining an "ideal" distance also has advantages for professionals: it allows the development and growth of an effective, complementary service which maximizes the effectiveness of professional services.



TABLE 3:  
REASONS FOR INTERACTING  
WITH SELF-HELP GROUPS

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>r with # of Referrals</u>	<u>r with # of Linkages</u>	<u>r with Knowledge</u>
Self-help groups offer individuals the opportunity to help as well as to be helped (BALANCE)	4.4	.12	.08	.31*
The services provided by self-help complement or supplement the services I provide (BALANCE)	4.3	.18*	.15*	.27*
Non-professionals can provide a type of service beyond the scope of professionals (BALANCE)	3.9	.16*	-.03	.19*
Assisting self-help in some fashion is a way of implementing the values of my profession (EXCHANGE)	4.0	.09	.16*	.26*
Self-help groups may reciprocate and refer some members to me for services (EXCHANGE)	3.0	.12	.02	-.03
Interacting with self-help groups may enable me to exert influence on them (EXCHANGE)	2.7	-.15*	-.02	-.11

\* = significant at .05 level

A second implication of a balance theory framework is for the professional who develops or initiates self-help groups. He/she must identify as his/her ultimate goal the creation of a "complementary" service rather than an alternative service. As such, the professional must attempt to impart to the group skills and organization as well as realistic expectations and limitations of what the group can accomplish with individual members. In such a manner, the professional is developing a primary community group, which, while autonomous from the professional sector, supports and complements professional services.

A third implication of a balance theory perspective is that professionals should select a linking or coordinating mechanism appropriate to the perceived social distance which exists between professionals and specific self-help groups. The selection of a specific linking mechanism (e.g. pattern of interaction) requires professionals to accurately assess the social distance which exists between professionals and self-help groups as well as identifying the desired or optimal distance which is needed to balance the two. For example, if a professional wishes to develop a relationship with a self-help group which is assessed to be at a great distance from professional services, the professional should choose a mechanism which decreases distance -- consultation (i.e., detached expert). Such an approach requires professionals to carefully analyze specific self-help groups and develop unique strategies for relating to them rather than adopting a uniform approach for relating to all self-help groups.

The balance theory concept of social distance holds promise for future research. Research may be directed at both professionals' and self-help members' perception of actual and "ideal" distance between professionals and self-help groups. Such research may enable both professionals and self-help groups to quantify and measure collaborative relationships in terms of social distance in an effort to arrive at some agreeable distance which maximized the efforts of both.

### Summary

The present research studied professionals' knowledge of, interactions with, and attitudes toward self-help groups using balance theory and exchange theory as conceptual frameworks. Results indicated the professionals do have knowledge of, interact with, and hold favorable attitudes toward self-help groups. However, results also indicated that professionals vary to a great extent on their knowledge of, interactions with, and attitudes toward self-help groups. In general, the results also supported a balance theory conceptualization of the relationship between professionals and self-help groups, but an exchange theory conceptualization was not supported. Implications of a balance theory conceptualization were discussed.

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